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THE FALASHAS.

DURING a recent expedition to Abyssinia, to which I was attached, I was in hopes of being fortunate enough to come across some of the interesting tribe of the Falashas. My duties, however, which took me through the Sudan and the southern part of the Abyssinian Empire, prevented my visiting this people, who live further north in the neighbourhood of Lake Tsana, and separated by the Blue Nile and many of its tributaries from the route taken by our party.

The rate, moreover, at which we were moving prevented my searching out members of the tribe, of whom a few are occasionally to be found in other parts of the country.

At Addis Alam, a town about a day's journey west of Addis Ababa, through which our caravan passed at full speed, there is, I believe, a colony of about fifty of this people, who have been brought there by the Emperor Menelik to build a stone palace for him; for the Falasha are said to be almost the only skilled masons in Ethiopia, as nearly all the houses of the Abyssinians are built of wood, wattle, or mud.

During the short time I was staying in Addis Ababa, Menelik's capital, I heard of the presence in the town of a couple of Falashas, but was unable to stay to meet them.

The lateness of the season, involving the rise of the Blue Nile into flood, prevented my tracking north to the Falasha country, so that I was forced to abandon any attempt to reach this tribe during the current year. I hope, however, to be able to pay such a visit later on.

I did, however, meet a gentleman, Ato Woldah Haimanot, who happened to be something of a scholar, and one of the very few educated Abyssinians who speak a European language. This gentleman, who has a very fair mastery of English (obtained, I believe, during a stay in Jerusalem), besides Amharic, Arabic, Galla, Tigrean, and a little Hebrew, took considerable interest in my idea of visiting the Falashas, and it is a letter from him which reached me here in England a few weeks ago which I append.

The letter is verbatim as I received it from Woldah Haimanot. I have added some foot-notes of my own, which may perhaps be superfluous to many readers.

I must take this opportunity to thank Mr. and Mrs. W. N. Macmillan, to whom I owe my presence as a member of the expedition, and Lt.-Col. Sir John Harrington, British Minister at the court of King Menelik, whose guest I was at Addis Ababa, for many kindnesses. Without them these few lines would not have been written.

CHARLES SINGER.

ADDIS-ABABA,

July 15, 1904.

DEAR DR. SINGER,

Very soon after you left for Djibouti I found the two Falasha gentlemen about whom I told you; their names are—the first Ato¹ Yetemengo, the other Ato Afawark, and their houses are in the quarters of the masons and carpenters situated between the British Legation and the Palace.

I inquired from these gentlemen the following questions of the Falasha customs and religions which you wanted to know.

1. Funeral customs just the same as Christian Abyssinians, except the body of a male Falasha is laid on the right side and that of a female on the left: any one who has touched a dead body is unclean.

¹ Ato is the Amharic title of courtesy, equivalent to our Mr. or Sir.

2. Whenever they kill an animal for food¹ they pronounce :
 "May the Lord God of Israel be blessed."

3. Phylacteries and amulets² are abominations by them.

4. Priests' attire and sacrifice utensils are according to the law of the Levites, except that the vessels have short handles.

5. Priests are married and unmarried, and as the Falashas assume to be descendants of the Levites who came to Abyssinia with Menelik I, any one of them who is fit is appointed for a priest.

6. Their sacrifices, customs of food and drink are according to the law of Moses.

7. Their calendars are taken from the appearance of the moon, and their feasts are during Passion Week.

8. Marriage is performed with prayers and ceremonies ; whenever the bride is not found to be a virgin she should be dismissed.

9. Circumcision is on the eighth day³.

10. They do not know any history or antiquity except the Old Testament⁴, and that they have come with Menelik I⁵.

11. Priests are consecrated with ceremonies.

¹ The Abyssinians have also their own method of killing, and eat no meat except that of animals killed by one of themselves.

² The Abyssinians almost all wear amulets, consisting for the most part of passages from the Gospels, written on parchment, and wrapped in little leather cases, not unlike in appearance the phylacteries in use among modern Jews. Crosses and other charms are also very commonly worn among them.

³ The Abyssinian Christians also retain the custom of circumcision.

⁴ I understand from Waldoh Haimanot that the Falashas use the same version of the Old Testament as the Abyssinian Christians (the version being in the Amharic tongue), omitting, however, certain books which are peculiar to the Amharic and Coptic Churches.

⁵ Menelik I is in Abyssinian tradition the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Negus Negusti (i. e. the King of Kings) of Ethiopia, who is the over-lord of the Rases or sub-kings of the Abyssinian Empire, always makes a claim to be a descendant of this first Menelik. The name Menelik was taken by the present sovereign on his assumption of imperial honours.

12. The women are treated well, and no divorce except for the cause of unchastity ¹.

13. Their laws and avenging of blood are in accord with the customs of the Christian Abyssinians.

14. The manner of observing their animal foods, and all clean and unclean things, and the separation of women during child-births, &c., is exactly according to the law of Moses.

15. The day of their Atonement is in the month of November.

16. They have a hope to return to Jerusalem.

17. Except leather-tanning, which is abomination to them, they engage themselves in every other work ².

18. They have no more arts or learnings than the Abyssinians.

19. They have no other saints but those of the Old Testament.

20. Mohammedans are considered infidels by them, but Christians are respected.

Their manner of observing clean and unclean things is very severe.

As the women of the Christians, or of the other peoples among whom they live, do not observe the Levitical laws regarding women, no Falasha touches the pots or any household utensils of the other people; the Falashas do not eat any food cooked or dressed by other people; they do not buy also any article of food, including butter and milk, in the market which is in the possession of other people, except live animals and raw corn and honey, in order that they might not be defiled. Whenever they trespass against any of these laws they

¹ The religious marriage, which is somewhat rare among the Christian Abyssinians, is indissoluble.

² I heard of the Falashas as pursuing the following occupations:—masons, smiths, farmers, carpenters, workers in precious metals. The work of the smith is regarded with superstition, terror, and some contempt by the other Abyssinians.

wash and shave themselves, and live in separation for seven days, eating uncooked beans.

Thus these Falashas have lived for a long time in this condition among such a great nation of different religions¹.

When I asked them about their origin, they told me that their ancestors came with Menelik I from Palestine; and they said: In the former times, the kings of Abyssinia themselves and their subjects being Jews, all was well in that time; but when the first Bishop Aboona² Salama (called Frumentius in Church History) came and preached the Gospel, both the king and his subjects being converted to Christianity, all the world was spoiled; and the Falashas began gradually to be despised by the Christians.

Very late in the reign of King Theodore, and King John in our days, when the Christians began to force the Mohammedans to be baptized there were some attempts by the lower classes of people against the Falashas also; but both the kings and the priests prevented them, and said: No man has right to blame the laws of Moses, because he is the inventor of the real worship of the true God. Thus the Falashas are proud and honoured among the great and learned Abyssinians³.

What educated man could be found without being touched with sympathy when he hears the story of these people who stick to their marvellous religion for so long a time in the midst of wild African people?

What I urge you is to apply to some Christian and Jewish charitable societies who can afford to assist in teaching them agriculture, arts, trades, elementary education, &c., according to modern views.

¹ The Falashas live in separate villages, and in no large tract of country do they form a majority of the population. Their numbers I have heard variously estimated at from 10,000 to 50,000.

² Aboona is the title of the head of the Abyssinian Church. Since the fifteenth century he has been drawn from the Coptic Church in Cairo.

³ From all I could hear the Falashas live on completely satisfactory terms with their neighbours, from whom they are not distinguishable in appearance.

If you have a chance of coming back again to visit the Falashas, you had better come to Addis-ababa first, and from here you can go to Dambia and Kowara where the Falashas are, and these two men who gave me the above information would like to accompany you, and accordingly you could accomplish your purpose properly. If you go via Massawah, the people will be suspicious against you, and you will have many inconveniences.

I remain,
Your obedient and humble servant,
WOLDAH HAIMANOT.